

The Word Made Flesh

John 1:1-14

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My family and I had a wonderful trip back home to Indiana. It's always good to be with family during the holidays. While we were there, we experienced something truly amazing. It was this strange meteorological phenomenon. When we arrived in Indiana and got out of the car, I looked up into the sky and saw this glowing orange ball. It seemed to be emitting both light and heat. I seem to recall seeing something like that around here, but it's been so long I can't remember it well.

In fact, our trip back to Chicago reminded me of this. When we left Jeffersonville on Thursday morning, the sun was shining. By the time we hit Indianapolis, a few clouds were scattered around the sky. By Lafayette, more clouds had gathered, but you could still find patches of blue. When we passed through Valparaiso, the blue was harder to find and the sun had trouble finding an opening in the clouds. By the time we got home to the frozen tundra of Grayslake, the sun had set, it was bitter cold, and the sky was gray.

I think we suffer from Seasonal Affect Disorder, which is also called the "winter blues." It's hard not to get depressed in this weather, isn't it? It's only appropriate that the acronym for Seasonal Affect Disorder is S.A.D. S.A.D. is literally caused by not enough exposure to sunlight. If you go too long without the sun, it starts to affect your mood, your personality, your whole way of life.

One of the treatments for SAD is what's called a therapy lamp. This lamp gives off powerful doses of light, basically tricking your brain into thinking you live in Fiji instead of Lincolnshire or Lake Forest. While this therapy lamp might have its benefits, nothing is better than the real thing. To survive these winters, we need exposure to the light.

In our gospel reading today, John is making the same point, but about a different kind of light. The other three gospels have more conventional beginnings, but not John. While Matthew and Luke start with the birth story and Mark starts with Jesus' baptism, John starts with this poetic prologue, which reads more like a hymn than a story.

John is trying to do several things here, including conveying the idea of Jesus to a Greek audience. One of the challenges in early Christianity was how to sell the idea of Jesus to a group of people who had no connection to Judaism and were not rooted in that tradition. To the Jews, the concept of a Messiah was powerful. But to the Greeks, it meant little or nothing. So how do you talk about the coming of the Messiah to folks who don't know what that means?

You put it into their terms. While the Greeks might not understand the Messiah, they do understand the idea of "logos." "Logos" in Greek means reason or mind and that idea carried a lot of meaning in Greek culture. So when John writes that the "logos" was with God and the "logos" was God, he's making a statement to the Greeks. When he says "the logos became flesh and dwelt among us," he's saying to them that the mind of God became a person.

But John isn't trying only to convince the Greeks about the nature of Jesus. John says "the world did not recognize him," so he's also talking to followers of Christ who may have missed the point of Christ's coming. There was a tendency to try to characterize Jesus as either fully human and not divine or fully divine and not human, to

compartmentalize Jesus' sphere of influence. And we're guilty of that as well. We turn to science to deal with external issues and to psychology to deal with internal issues, which leaves Jesus to handle the rest, whatever the rest is. But John is saying to his ancient readers and to us that Jesus is over it all. Not only is Jesus the Word and the Word was God, but Jesus also became flesh and dwelt among us. Through Jesus, God became one of us, bringing with him a new beginning.

There's another book in the Bible that starts out, "In the beginning." We'll be looking at that passage next week. John's opening calls to mind the opening of Genesis, when God created the world. In effect, Jesus' coming is a new creation, a fresh beginning for humanity. God has broken into the world to present to us a new way of knowing and relating to God.

And through Christ, God has given us a powerful tool to help us live our lives. John says, "In him was life, and that life was the light of humanity." John uses the word "light" 21 times in his gospel, often times in contrast to the word "darkness." "The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it."

Our whole creation is geared toward the light. If you put a plant in a dark room and let in a shaft of light, the plant will grow toward that light. A car's headlights only shine a few dozen feet, but you can travel a thousand miles that way. I still remember fondly that golden orb in the sky over Christmas vacation. We crave the light in our lives, maybe because we are so often surrounded by darkness.

John's metaphor of light is illuminating for us. Think about how our use of light corresponds to Jesus' role in our lives. For example, Psalm 119 says that God is like a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. In other words, Jesus is like a flashlight, guiding us through the darkness or helping us find our way when we are lost.

Psalm 27 says, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" When I think of light that drives away fear, I think of the nightlights in our girls' room. Jesus offers us assurance and protection, even when we feel the darkness pressing in.

John says in verse 9, "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world." In other words, Jesus imparts wisdom and understanding, like a light bulb in our heads. Our relationship with Jesus and our reading of scripture can help us understand things we might not be able to comprehend otherwise.

And then there's the sun, which gives both light and heat. Jesus lights up our life and provides warmth to our hearts. My friend David Shirey says, "No plant will grow, no flower will blossom, no fruit will ripen if deprived of the light of the sun. And as far as John is concerned, no soul can grow, no personality can blossom, no one's faith can fully ripen if deprived of regular exposure to the Light of the World."

The challenge is making time for that regular exposure. One of the things Jesus' coming did was it disrupted the status quo and changed the rules about how people related to God. Christ's coming was an interruption, "inter" meaning "into" and "rupt" meaning "break," like "rupture." Jesus' coming was literally God breaking into this world.

Have you ever had your day broken into like that? You think you know what you are going to do but then something comes along and shakes your world like a snow globe. You plan on running errands but get a flat tire. You had hoped to have lunch with a friend but woke up feeling sick. You were going to get some work done around the house but got a phone call from a relative in need.

I've found that in my job, my most significant ministry often gets done by way of interruption. But I don't see them as interruptions; I see them as opportunities. When someone calls me while I'm writing my sermon, which happened this week, it's not an interruption of my work, but a chance to live out what I'm writing, to take the word on the page and let it become flesh by embodying God's care and love.

The light that gives life has indeed come into the world, has come to each of us, interrupting our plans and our lives. And we are called to reflect that light into this world, into our conversations and relationships and even into our interruptions. Because that's where God is most needed and most present, and it's often where life is most meaningful. Who could schedule the moment you first fall in love, or your child's first step, or your grandchild's first word? Could you imagine treating those things as interruptions? What if we saw interruptions as opportunities for God to do something surprising?

We've just gone through a period of giving gifts to each other, but I want to encourage you to give a gift to yourself today. I want you to give yourself permission to be interrupted by God, to let God break into your life and shine a little light. Maybe this will happen as you pick up the Bible and read a few passages, or as you sit quietly and think about your blessings. Maybe this will happen as you call a friend you haven't talked with in some time or while you're serving at a soup kitchen. Give God space in your life to break in.

There is darkness in this world. But we also believe there is light, a light so strong that the darkness cannot destroy it. It's a light that guides us along our way, offers assurance and protection, gives us understanding, and fills our life with warmth. I know a lot of people who live in darkness and could use that kind of light. I bet you do, too. Reflect God's love in your life. Live like you believe Christ has come. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. Let there be light!